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ABSTRACT

Since all American literature has been written or recounted by members of ethnic groups, teachers and scholars of American literature should concern themselves with an ethnic American literature. Although immigrants and their descendants have been culturally assimilated to varying degrees over a period of years, they have nonetheless remained significantly ethnic in a social sense. In order to cope adequately with multiethnic American literature, American literary studies should become international and Americanists should become multilingual as a group, minimally bilingual as individuals. Furthermore, they should become sensitive to the characteristics of ethnic cultures and of immigrant experiences. Toward this end, Americanists will have to join and work cooperatively with three groups of professional colleagues: literary and linguistic specialists in the non-English languages, specialists in the history and culture of the nations and regions from which American immigrants came, and specialists in the sociocultural history of ethnic groups in the United States and in the North America of pre-Columbian and colonial times. (LL)

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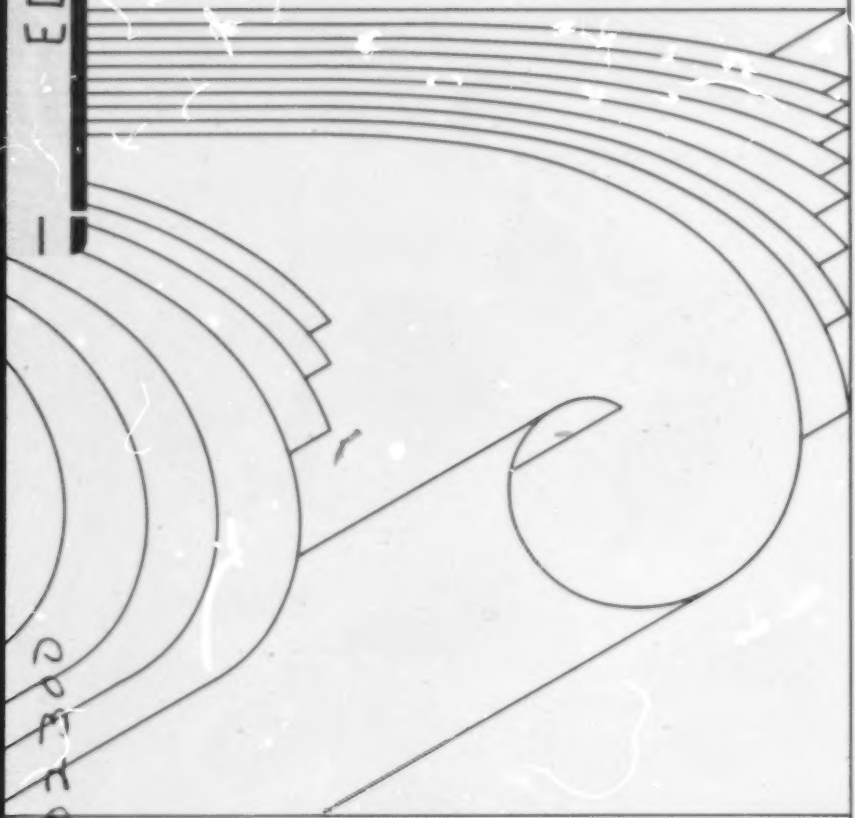
by Brom Weber



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This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, held in conjunction with the Modern Language Association of America, on December 28, 1974. Dr. Weber is Professor of English and American Studies on the campus of the University of California, Davis. He has published extensively in many periodicals. His books include *Sense and Sensibility in Twentieth-Century Writing*, and *Hart Crane: A Biographical and Critical Study*.

The symbol below indicates that this issue of the series is dedicated to celebrating the Bicentennial Celebration of the United States of America.

Our Multi-Ethnic Origins and American Literary Studies*

by Brom Weber

We are assembled to pay homage to Professor Robert E. Spiller and the monumental *Literary History of the United States*, an undertaking that has influenced and bolstered the study of American literature and culture for two and a half decades. However, I am sure he will not think it inappropriate of me briefly to memorialize one of his collaborators, the late Henry A. Pochmann.

It is fitting that I do so because it was Henry Pochmann—aided by fellow specialists—who wrote Chapter 41 of the *Literary History of the United States*. That chapter obviously has special meaning for the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States. Under the title of "The Mingling of Tongues," Pochmann reviewed and analyzed contributions to American literature made by American writers of non-English, European ancestry. It was also Henry Pochmann who wrote the classic, as well as massive, *German Culture in the United States...1600–1900*, which appeared later in 1957 and probably will not be superseded for many decades.

In "The Mingling of Tongues" Pochmann considered successively the literature and literary cultures of German, French, Spanish, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Jewish ethnic groups in the United States. He observed that these and other ethnic literatures not yet studied in adequate detail—including that of Asian immigrants and their descendants—had developed in accordance with a common pattern involving three progressive stages reflecting the immigration experience and its aftermath in the United States. The first stage was "a pioneer period of diaries and letters." The second stage involved "the expression of ideas, religious and political," in newspapers, periodicals, and books, often taking the form of "memoirs and histories" as well as "essays and polemics." The third, highest stage was the creation of poetry, fiction, and drama.

Pochmann noted with approbation the paradoxical impact upon ethnic groups of hostile national legislation in the early 1920s which virtually halted the epic proportions and heterogeneous nature of earlier immigration. That legislation established a relatively small annual limit on further immigration from Europe, discriminated against southern and eastern European immigrants with restrictive numerical quotas, and prohibited entirely the immigration of Japanese. The admirable response of affected ethnic groups to this expression of disfavor, Pochmann noted, had been increased "pride in their racial characteristics" and an intensified interest in "their folklore and folk literature." He concluded approvingly that "the early desire to cast the Old World into a mythical melting pot has given place to a

conviction that the immigrant serves his adopted country best when he is steeped in the traditions of his fatherland; that various and lively regional cultures increase the vitality of the culture of the United States."

Some of Pochmann's generalizations and assumptions may be questioned in 1974, a quarter of a century after his article appeared. If he were here with us today, I know that he would respond with his customary enthusiasm and good nature to such a procedure. He would understand that I was not commenting from an adversary position, intending rather to strengthen and perpetuate his positive belief in the historical significance and qualitative value of American ethnic literatures, as well as his manifest concern for their continued existence and study.

Much thought has been given to the problem of ethnic groups in American life in the twenty-five years since Pochmann wrote. Similarly, the nature of culture in the United States and elsewhere has been explored theoretically and in the field. We no longer use the term "race" as the equivalent of the term "culture," preferring to limit the scope of race to non-cultural, biogenetic facts such as skin color. Culture has been variously defined and there is some dispute about whether it is the individual's or society's perception which provides us with the data of which culture consists. Meanwhile, however, most definitions coalesce in general agreement that culture is "the way of life of a society... consist(ing) of prescribed ways of behaving or norms of conduct, beliefs, values, and skills, along with the behavioral patterns and uniformities based on these categories—all this we call 'non-material culture'—plus, in an extension of the term, the artifacts created by these skills and values, which we call 'material culture.'" [1] The term "ethnic" has been defined as a particular combination of race, religion, and national origin; individuals who possess identical combinations are members of the same ethnic group; there are many combinations and many ethnic groups in the United States.

One tenet that animated Pochmann remains with us as strongly as ever. I think we must take issue with the view that "literature" is a term properly restricted to the third stage of writing as Pochmann conceived of it. He viewed writing as moving in dialectic progression from low to high, following a Hegelian evolutionary process culminating in particular formal genres—fiction, poetry, drama—that alone warranted designation as literature. This narrowly belletristic conception must compel us to deny that Franklin's autobiography, Emerson's essays, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Henry Adams's *Education* can be regarded as literature.

The historical process which rejected the idea that literature was any cultural artifact comprised of letters of the alphabet and potentially imbued with imagination and meaning is a comparatively recent development. Its course was succinctly described and negated by

Raymond Williams in the November 15, 1974, issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*: "Let it be said. I am against what literature has been made to mean, and there is an example from the language which should make this clear. Literature, as a word, was a specialization from the whole body of discourse in speech and writing; the specialization, as you would expect, is contemporary with the beginning of printing and the dominance of the printed book. Then, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was a further specialization of meaning: literature was not now all books, all printed writing—from history and memoirs and journals and biographies and novels and plays to poetry and philosophy and essays and sermons and reports—but a selection of these: poems of course; novels and, though with some difficulty, plays; imaginative literature, fiction. Finally, when English began being studied in universities, there was a further specialization: 'literature' was restricted not only to printed books, as abstracted from the whole body of discourse in speech and writing, not only to printed books of an imaginative or fictional kind, but to the 'good' or 'serious' among such books, the rest being—what? In the end we said 'popular' or 'sub-literary' as we had earlier said 'general' or 'discursive,' to preserve a conventional dualism of imagination and reason, or of feelings and thought."

The narrow view of literature guiding Pochmann conflicted with his salutary stress upon the broad, wholesome contribution which ethnic subcultures could make to the diversification and vitality of American culture. The diaries, letters, memoirs, polemical expositions, histories, and essays written by immigrant Americans and their ethnic descendants are replete with the substance and ethos of the foreign cultures in which immigrants had been nurtured and which linger in ethnic-group memory and life. Nevertheless, this vast body of writing, as well as orally created and transmitted discourse, was in effect excluded from the canon of literature, its study as literature, as rich cultural artifact, discouraged.

Not surprisingly, those who dealt with the allegedly non-literary writings of immigrant Americans and their descendants most often were historians without primary literary concerns, folklorists whose findings appeared in periodicals and books neglected by literary scholars, or mavericks who risked professional neglect. One ironic consequence of the three-stage theory of immigrant writing propounded by Pochmann was that the literature of the third stage often has remained virtually unknown, precisely because it had been composed during the first two allegedly non-literary stages. For example, not enough American literary scholars, I feel reasonably certain, are familiar with the Pennsylvania German poetry written from 1685 to 1830, which John Joseph Stoudt collected in a volume published in 1955 by the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, or with the lively Dutch poetry written by Henricus Selijns and Jacob Steendam in pre-English New York City which Ellis Lawrence Raesly discussed in a study of New Netherland published in 1945.

The impression I may have been generating that my late friend Henry Pochmann is chargeable with responsibility for the neglect of American ethnic literature is absurd, of course. Indeed, we could and should have learned much from his chapter in the *Literary History of the United States*, as well as from Randolph G. Adams's discussion in chapter 3 of Spanish, French, and Dutch accounts of North American travels and from Stith Thompson's consideration of American Indian literatures in chapter 42. At very least, their solid forays should have stimulated curiosity. Unfortunately, historical curiosity, in an age dominated by ahistorical if not antihistorical credos, was not particularly lively. Did the state of affairs improve significantly in the 1960s, when it seemed as if everything was being re-examined or, as some believed, being examined for the first time? I am afraid my answer must be negative and I present myself as a bit of evidence for my conclusion.

In the mid-1960s, I and two other Americanists undertook to edit a survey anthology of American literature from its beginnings. I remember during one planning session broaching the desirability of including the work of neglected ethnic writers, even if it meant restricting ourselves to those who had written or been translated into English. We agreed that Afro-American writers, who had not received any attention in the *Literary History of the United States*, should be represented. As for other ethnic American writers, were there any of literary quality apart from some well-recognized Jewish-American literary figures? Obviously not. When our anthology appeared in 1969, therefore it merely contained an oft-reprinted piece by Crevecoeur, along with selections from Shapiro, Mailer, Malamud, Bellow, Levertov, Ginsberg, Wheatley, Chesnutt, Toomer, Hughes, and Jones. Since then, I regret having to note, no other American literature survey-text with which I am familiar has ventured any further significantly.

In my judgment, therefore, it's probably not excessive to declare that most students studying American literature for the first time in an English department survey-course are not introduced to the phenomenon of ethnic American literature in a reasonably responsible or comprehensive fashion. It must be so because we do not have any genuinely multi-ethnic survey texts of American literature available as yet.

It may seem odd to be concerned with survey courses and survey texts when the former are at the bottom of the curricular ladder and the latter frequently scissors-and-paste jobs not taken seriously by anyone but students. Yet the survey course and the materials offered its students are serious matters, for they create an ambience and provide a substance indicative of the deep character of American literary studies. Still, it may be objected, publishers are issuing collections of ethnic literature in ever-increasing numbers and some of these are even multi-ethnic in range. Surely incomplete survey texts can be augmented temporarily with remedial materials and in good time the survey texts will be revised. More than limited optimism would be

warranted if the ethnic groups involved were not restricted to a chosen few, if the multi-ethnic texts included the writings of English, French, Dutch, German, Polish, and all other ethnic segments of the population. The truth is that existing survey texts as well as so-called ethnic texts reflect the dominant Anglo-conformist culture pre-eminent in English departments and American society as a whole. The purity of the survey text is maintained while tactful obeisance is paid to topical fashion and political push with separate and equal supplementary texts that can be weighed and counted as measures of good faith and deed.

Some brief academic social history is in order at this point. Many of us can remember when American literature was not taught at all except in a handful of English departments. English departments were and, in most instances, still remain deeply oriented toward British literature and culture, neither of these until recently affected by ethnic sociopolitical turbulence comparable to that prominent in American life since the early seventeenth century. The grudging addition of American literary studies to English department curricula has been accompanied by traumatic psychosocial stresses not unlike that characterizing the American government's recent effort to bring a few selected ethnic groups into the socioeconomic mainstream. English departments now are analogous to the British empire in its dying days, when imperial outposts listened anxiously for the sounds of native unrest and rebellion. How could it be otherwise, when English departments are structurally bi-national, with the literature of the host country in the anomalous sociocultural role of an ethnic subculture?

At the risk of revealing my paranoia, I must confess that I have sometimes thought that the fading notorious reluctance of English departments to teach writing and language with full commitment has been due to the conscious or subconscious awareness that such enterprises inevitably must concern themselves with writing and speech as practiced primarily in the United States rather than in England. Now, having castigated the Anglo-conformism of English departments, let me turn to the Americanists within those departments.

Is it any real wonder that Americanists have not dealt profoundly enough with the problem of ethnic American literature? When they have not been preoccupied with defending the general validity of American literary studies, they often have been too busy proving that the third-stage literature of Poe, Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, James, Frost, Stevens, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald has at least as much qualitative value as the worst of Scott, Coleridge, Tennyson, Dickens, either of the two Rossettis, Meredith, Clough, Kipling, Housman, and Thomas.

Why should teachers and scholars of American literature bother themselves with ethnic American literature? The reason I find most persuasive is that, whether we like it or not, all American literature has been written or recounted by members of ethnic groups. Immigrants

and their descendants have been culturally assimilated to varying degrees in the passage of time, but they have nonetheless remained significantly ethnic in a social sense. The population of North America prior to establishment of the subsequent United States of America and thereafter has been the product of successive waves of immigration from many regions of the world, including Asia and Africa as well as England and continental Europe. Despite restrictions, immigration is still in process, most vividly exemplified by the influx of Cubans in Florida and Puerto Ricans in New York. Nor can one ignore the somewhat earlier immigration of the 1930s and later which brought numbers of European refugees from fascism and communism.

English immigrants rapidly assumed a dominating role on the Eastern seaboard in colonial times, subduing or otherwise establishing control over American Indians and settlers from the Netherlands, France, Sweden, and elsewhere. Yet, as the late Richard Hofstadter observed in *America at 1750*, "by the time of the Revolution the total white immigration was probably as large as or larger than the entire colonial population of 1700, and the English homogeneity of the colonies had been decisively broken." [2] An American Council of Learned Societies committee, established to investigate the composition of white linguistic and national stocks in the United States in 1790, reported in 1932 that the demographic data upon which the restrictive immigration quotas of the 1920s were based was inaccurate. The English, for example, had been estimated by government experts to comprise 82.1% of the total white population of 3,226,944, whereas the ACLS committee reduced this figure to 60.1% (1,939,398). There were, in addition, 279,820 Germans, 100,000 Dutch, 261,138 Scots, 308,910 Irish, 73,750 French, 21,000 Swedes, 25,625 Spaniards, and a miscellaneous 219,805 who could not be categorized and probably included Jews, Portuguese, Italians, and other ethnic elements not cited specifically in the ACLS committee report. [3]

The heterogeneity of population existing in 1790 continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ethnic newcomers were culturally assimilated to a considerable extent, as I have said, but recent studies indicate that social assimilation did not occur as might have been expected. The sociologist Milton Gordon, whose seminal study of American assimilation appeared a decade ago, has made it abundantly clear that immigrant Americans and their descendants responded to American society in two distinct ways. On the one hand, primary social relations and affiliations remained within an ethnic group. On the other hand, only secondary social relations cut across the boundaries of the ethnic group. This social phenomenon Gordon entitled "structural pluralism." [4]

It appeared, then, that the immigrant American and his descendants retained a sense of ethnicity based upon a real or imagined mutuality of ancestry, kinship, history, religion, and language with other immigrants and their descendants of similar ethnic background, so that

together they formed and sustained a primary ethnic group with considerable historical durability and psychosocial value. Studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century voting patterns by political scientists and historians have supported Gordon's conclusions by revealing that when "ethnic and religious groups confronted vital political problems... they responded as blacks, Jews, Germans, or Catholics, not as assimilated Americans grouped cross-culturally by occupation, class or neighborhood." (5)

The sense of ethnicity appears never to have died away in American life and from all indications is growing ever stronger. For example, the data in Lubomyr R. Wynar's *Encyclopedic Directory of Ethnic Newspapers and Periodicals in the United States* indicates that as of 1970–71 there were 43 ethnic groups issuing 410 publications in non-English languages, 207 bi-lingual publications, and 286 publications in English. The total circulation amounted to 8,786,122. The grand total of 903 ethnically centered publications represented an increase of 205 over the number reportedly issued in 1960. Only 118 of the 903 ethnic publications had been established prior to 1900, so that 785 had been initiated in our own century. (6)

That immigrants to the United States and their descendants have retained a strong sense of ethnicity may be disappointing to intellectuals imbued with Enlightenment notions of universalism. Many intellectuals have sought to transcend the ostensibly reprehensible localism and parochialism of race, religion, national origin, and geographical location. Milton Gordon has hypothesized that some intellectuals, contrariwise, do remain "actively" or "passively" ethnic. But the majority apparently become "marginally ethnic," a condition made financially and socially feasible by the growth of higher education, mass communications, and mass entertainment. Speaking from personal experience as a "marginally ethnic" intellectual, an experience which may be representative, I seem to have been affected as a literary scholar and critic by the desire to de-emphasize the particulars of experience and to emphasize abstractions and universals. This obviously paralleled developments in twentieth-century visual and literary arts as well as in literary criticism. It was surely no accident that, like so many other Americanists, I long was unable to find artistic value in realism, in local color, in dialect, in much that makes up the stuff of ethnic experience. That was in the distant past, I am happy to say, and I feel no present discomfort about my reversal of attitudes.

A similar if not identical reversal of attitudes must occur in all Americanists if American literature, inescapably ethnic in origin, the product of writers from countless ethnic groups, is to be fully known and responsibly evaluated. At present, it would be foolhardy for anyone to venture more than the most hesitant kind of generalization about any particular ethnic American literature unless what I go on to propose has already been accomplished by literary scholars. More than a simple reorientation of self will be required.

I said earlier that English departments were bi-national in scope. American literary studies, in order to cope adequately with multi-ethnic American literature, should reach out further and, paradoxically, become international. Americanists should become multi-lingual as a group, minimally bi-lingual as individuals. They should become sensitive to the particularities of an ethnic culture, of an ethnic group, of an immigrant experience. It will be necessary for Americanists who become concerned with Pennsylvania German poetry to soak themselves in the various German tongues used in colonial and post-colonial America, to master the details of the Irish Catholic experience in the Upper Midwest if they would probe the depth and make sense of the surface of Fitzgerald's fiction. In this undertaking, of course, Americanists will have to join and work cooperatively with three groups of professional colleagues: (1) literary and linguistic specialists in the non-English languages; (2) specialists in the history and culture of the nations and regions from which American immigrants have come; (3) specialists in the sociocultural history of ethnic groups in the United States and in North America of pre-Columbian and colonial times.

It is ironic that American literary studies has the possibility of becoming international even though its focus will be American. The day may yet arrive when an Americanist who can read, write, and speak Chinese will be studying the literature of Chinese-Americans and perhaps visiting China as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature. Comparative literary studies conducted competently may become an everyday affair for Americanists. It should be obvious that multilingualism and multi-culturalism are but one future direction for American literary studies. Its growth will make possible a genuine universalism inspiring respect for its inclusiveness rather than pathos for its provincial neglect of the imagination, thought, and experience present in ethnic American literatures.

I have been so unabashedly personal in my comments that I hope I may be forgiven one final indiscretion. While visiting Korea as a Fulbright lecturer, I was asked by several Korean professors to deliver a lecture on the American Dream. I agreed to do so, but only after they would respond to a request of mine. "Tell me something about the Korean Dream," I asked. There was much embarrassed smiling and silence. Finally, one Korean professor responded: "Korean culture and people are very complex. There isn't one Korean Dream, but many Korean dreams." "Then why do you ask me to reduce the complexities and peoples of the United States to one comprehensive generalization?" I inquired. The answer came without hesitancy: "American professors who have lectured in Korea before you have always spoken about the American Dream. It must be a reality, at least for Americans, even though it does seem contrary to other national experiences." After the interchange, I was never again requested to lecture on the American Dream. I did promise, however, that someday

in the future American visitors to Korea would discuss the multiplicity of dreams which have striated our national life. The study of American literature as a multi-ethnic phenomenon is one way of ensuring that my promise may be fulfilled.

* This paper was read in virtually the same form at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, held in conjunction with the Modern Language Association of America, on December 28, 1974. Some footnotes have been added and I have made some changes and additions in response to comments made at the meeting and, later, to me.

(1) Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 32–33. Other definitions of culture might have been offered, but I have used the one in Gordon's book, to which I refer again, in order to draw the attention of literary scholars to a work fundamental for the understanding of ethnicity in the United States.

(2) *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (1971: rpt. New York: Vintage Random, 1973), p. 31.

(3) American Council of Learned Societies, "Report of the Committee on Linguistic and National Stocks in the Population of the United States," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1931* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1932), I, 124–25.

(4) Gordon, pp. 159, 235–41, et passim.

(5) John L. Shover, "Ethnicity and Religion in Philadelphia Politics, 1924–40," *American Quarterly*, 25 (1973), p. 515. The specific reference is to historical events in Philadelphia, but the general applicability of Shover's comments to other American areas and periods is made clear in the article.

(6) *Encyclopedic Directory of Ethnic Newspapers and Periodicals in the United States* (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1972), passim.